

Pennsylvania Railroad Company House
1121-23 8th Avenue
Fourth Ward Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5503

HABS
PA,
7-ALTO,
10-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD COMPANY HOUSE
(Klesius and Sheedy Heating and Roofing)
HABS No. PA-5503

HABS
PA,
7-ALTO,
10 -

- Location: 1121-23 8th Ave., Altoona, Blair County, Pa.
- Present Owner: George and Margaret Sheedy.
- Present Use: Sheet metal shop on the first floor; one apartment on the second. The remainder of the building is used for storage.
- Significance: Unlike the Cambria Iron Works in Johnstown, which built hundreds of company houses, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company eschewed the construction of housing for its sub-managerial workers. The double house at 1121-23 8th Ave. was one of only eight identical frame houses built in 1853 by the PRR to house its skilled and semi-skilled workers. It is the only one still standing. Enlarged with a projecting brick storefront in 1907, the two-and-a-half-story house incorporates Gothic Revival vergeboards and a prominent finial on the gable end.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Probably 1853. In 1852, eight contiguous lots on Eighth Avenue were conveyed from Archibald Wright to Herman Haupt, superintendent of transportation for the Pennsylvania Railroad. The houses were probably constructed immediately after Haupt deeded the unimproved lots to the railroad company in January 1853. An 1853 photo (HABS No. PA-5784) show them under construction.
2. Architect: None.
3. Original and subsequent owners: On March 7, 1865, the railroad company sold the eastern half of the double house (No. 1121) to its occupant, John McCormick, a trainmaster, and his wife Mary. Two years later, in January 1867, the western half of the house (No. 1123) was deeded to George Hawksworth, the foreman of a blacksmith shop. In 1906, his wife Susan sold this half to George Klesius, a tinsmith, in whose family the property remains.

In contrast, the eastern half of the house became rental property for a long succession of wealthy businessmen who resided elsewhere, including William Lloyd, David K. Ramey, a contractor and lumber merchant who lived in the prestigious 1200 block of 12th Street, and T. B. Patten, the postmaster of Altoona, who also resided on the west side of town. George Klesius purchased this western half in 1923, continuing to rent it to tenants until 1953, when his sheet metal business expanded into the entire first floor of the house. In 1972, the property was deeded it to the present owners for \$11,150. (Deed books: D/173; E/493. For the continuing chain of title for No. 1121, see 30/654; 28/408; 30/655; 50/243; 54/124 and 316/319. For No. 1123, see T/257; Will Books G/88 and 168/666. For the consolidated property, see 402/341 and 930/519.)

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Unknown.
5. Original plans and construction: Much of the original plan has been obscured by twentieth-century alterations. Judging solely by the physical evidence, however, each of the mirror-image halves had a side-passage plan, and was four rooms deep. The third-floor attic was finished and apparently used

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for additional bedroom space.

6. Alterations and additions: By the turn of the twentieth century, 8th Avenue was assuming an increasingly commercial character. In 1907, a two-story, 24'-11" x 16'-11" brick storefront was added to the facade of No. 1123. A third chimney was added at that time, providing heat for the upstairs apartment. More recent changes to the consolidated property include the removal of interior walls and some of the fireplaces on the first floor. The upper floors, however, remain virtually unaltered, except for the addition of bathrooms and a kitchen in three of the former bedrooms. Still more recently, the exterior walls of the east side of the house have been altered, extending the building's frontage by 7'-6".

B. Historical Context:

The problems of attracting and housing a new work force in the virtual wilderness were soon apparent to railroad officials. As early as 1852, Herman Haupt, local superintendent of transportation for the PRR, acknowledged the housing situation in Altoona and explained the railroad's policy. Haupt had stressed to PRR President William Patterson "the importance of providing in time suitable accommodations for our operatives at Altoona," but Patterson preferred that housing be funded by private capital. Haupt decided to provide the private capital himself and formed a joint stock association ("to which I myself was a large contributor") to construct thirty-two houses. When he had to leave Altoona the following year, Haupt requested that the PRR take over the venture at least to complete the immediate commitment for eight double houses. He again urged that the buildings "are indispensable and no transfer of our operations to Altoona can be made until they are erected."¹

All told, the PRR owned eleven double houses including eight on 8th Avenue, probably those Haupt had initiated. However, the company preferred to divest itself of such investments, and sold the houses to their employee-occupants in 1859 "on terms advantageous to both parties." The purchasers included Jacob Szink, a fireman, at 1205 8th Ave.; Ambrose Ward, a car inspector, at No. 1209; and John Glanding, a blacksmith, at No. 1227. Only the double house at 1121-23 8th Ave., originally purchased by John McCormick, trainmaster, and George W. Hawsworth, foreman of the blacksmith shop, remains.²

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The front-gabled double house retains most of its original exterior fabric, including Gothic Revival cornice detailing. Large and deep (compared to other housing types from the period and region), with numerous fireplaces, the house would have accommodated two families in relative comfort and style.
2. Condition of fabric: Good-fair.

¹Fifth Annual Report of the Directors of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company to the Stockholders, February 2, 1852 (Philadelphia: Crissy and Markley, 1852), 64.

²Thirteenth Annual Report of the Directors of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company to the Stockholders, February 6, 1860 (Philadelphia: Crissy and Markley, 1862), 45. Deed Books: V/585 (No. 1205), R/362 (No. 1209), R/24 (No. 1227), 30/654 (No. 1121), and T/257 (No. 1123). Blair County Courthouse, Hollidaysburg, Pa.

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B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The two-and-one-half-story, rectangular frame house measures 32'-4" x 67'-5". The brick store added to the front of No. 1123 measures 24'-11" x 16'-11".
2. Foundations: Fieldstone.
3. Walls: The western half of the facade has been obscured by the addition of the projecting storefront. The eastern half, which has been covered with asphalt siding, has narrow cornerboards. The west and south facades of the house have narrow, lapped clapboarding. The storefront is in two parts, with the apartment entrance located in the left bay, and a single-story, store entrance and display window topped by novelty siding and a wood cornice in the second and third bays. Its facade is laid in running bond; the east and west walls, in common bond.
4. Structural systems, framing: Balloon-frame construction; attic framing is inaccessible.
5. Chimneys: Two rectangular brick chimneys project through the ridge of the roof. A third, smaller chimney is located on the downward slope of the west side of the roof.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The original entrance to the eastern half of the double house remains intact; however, the door itself is new. On the storefront addition, the apartment entrance has a panelled door with one rectangular pane of glass set into the upper portion, and a rectangular transom above. The door is topped by a smaller wood cornice.
 - b. Windows: The two-part, first-floor window on the eastern side of the facade is an early twentieth-century replacement; the original window opening probably lined up with the second-floor window, which now has one-over-one lights. The storefront has three large plate-glass windows with the words "KLESIUS AND SHEEDY" stencilled in gold. The three second-floor windows have segmental arches, projecting wood sills, and one-over-one lights. There is a paired, round-arched window beneath the eaves of the gable end. The windows of the west facade have drip molds and two-over-two lights.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape: Gable-front with a steep pitch. A corbelled parapet wall obscures the flat roof of the storefront.
 - b. Cornice, eaves: The house has an open cornice with the rafters sheathed parallel to the overlying roof. There are decorative vergeboards and a prominent finial on the gable end.
 - c. Dormers: The two pairs of gabled dormers each have one pointed-arch window with nine-over-six lights.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

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- a. First: Most of the first floor plan has been obscured by the post-1950s expansion of the sheet metal shop.
 - b. Second and third: Each half of the double house has a linear plan; it is one room wide and four rooms deep.
2. Stairways: The enclosed wood stairways are original.
 3. Flooring: Original narrow pine boards are used throughout the house; some second- floor rooms also have old linoleum carpets.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster on lath. In several of the second- and third-floor rooms, there are multiple layers of wallpaper, some with matching borders that date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
 5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The original pine doors are typical of the Greek Revival period. They have four narrow, rectangular molded panels.
 - b. Windows: The windows have wide, flat surrounds with molded sills.
 - c. Fireplaces: Some of the remaining fireplaces on the second floor have wide bolection moldings.
- D. Site:
1. General setting and orientation: The house stands on 8th Avenue between 11th and 12th streets, facing northwest.
 2. Outbuildings: A one-story frame garage is attached to the rear of the building and opens onto an alley.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Early views: 1853 photograph showing eight double houses along 8th Avenue, reproduced in Robert L. Emerson Allegheny Passage: An Illustrated History of Blair County. Woodland Hills, Cal.: Windsor Publications, 1984, p. 34.
- B. Interview: George Sheedy, interview by Nancy Spiegel, Altoona, Pa., August 21, 1989.
- C. Bibliography:
 1. Primary sources:

Altoona, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Co., Ltd., 1888.

City Directories, 1870-1985, passim. Altoona Area Public Library and Baker Mansion Historical Library.

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Insurance Maps of Altoona, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn-Perris Co., 1894.

Insurance Maps of Altoona, Blair County, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1909.

Insurance Maps of Altoona...Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1932.

Deed Books and Tax Assessments for Altoona's Eighth Ward. Blair County Courthouse, Hollidaysburg, Pa.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the fourth ward (HABS No. PA-5786) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach.

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Fig. 1.1 Second- and third-floor plans. Drawn by Richard Koochagin.

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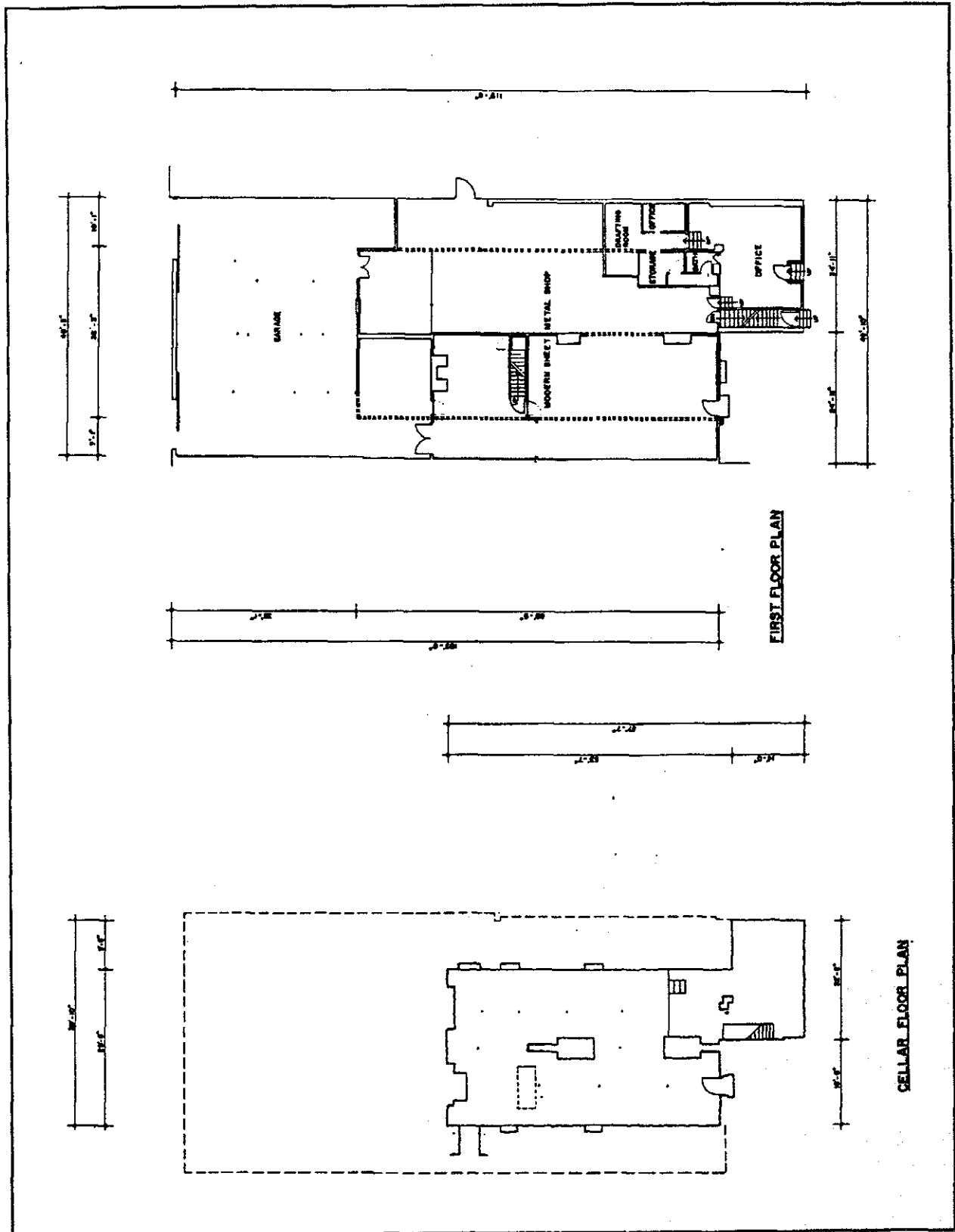


Fig. 1.2 Cellar- and first-floor plans. Drawn by Richard Koochagin.

Addendum To:

PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD COMPANY, HOUSE

First Ward Neighborhood
1121-23 Eighth Avenue

Altoona

Blair Co.

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REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

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